

VZCZCXRO8735

PP RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHDF RUEHFL RUEHIK RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHLN
RUEHLZ RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHBW #0928/01 2531546
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 091546Z SEP 08
FM AMEMBASSY BELGRADE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0397
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RHEHNS/NSC WASHDC
RUZEJAA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BELGRADE 000928

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O.12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SR](#)

SUBJECT: SERBIA: RADICAL LEADER RESIGNS

REF: BELGRADE 913

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Acting head of the Serbian Radical Party Tomislav Nikolic resigned from his party leadership positions on September 5 and created a new parliamentary caucus of 19 members on September 8. Although it was widely known that Nikolic was frequently in conflict with party president and ICTY indictee Vojislav Seselj, most observers did not expect the split, which was triggered by disagreement over the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union, to happen so soon. If Nikolic succeeds in creating a new opposition grouping in Parliament, Seselj's Radical Party could become even more of an anachronism. End Summary.

Nikolic Resigns Over SAA

¶2. (U) Tomislav Nikolic, acting head of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), resigned his positions as party leader and head of the parliamentary caucus during a high-level party meeting held the night of September 5. SRS leader Vojislav Seselj reportedly participated by phone from The Hague where he is standing trial on war crimes charges. Tensions between Seselj and Nikolic, who came close to defeating Boris Tadic in February's presidential election, have been simmering for years; the proximate cause of the break was Nikolic's announcement last week that the SRS would vote in favor of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU. (The SAA has the necessary votes to pass without SRS support.)

Nikolic Keeps Seat, Forms New Caucus

¶3. (U) In his first public comments after resigning, Nikolic said he might form a new party. In a September 8 statement to reporters in the Parliament building, Nikolic said "currently, I am a member of SRS, but the next few days will determine my political fate. I continue to see myself in politics." He emphasized that his political activity was based on certain principles, and "if I cannot realize these principles in my party, I will have to realize them in a new one." Nikolic also said that his resignation had "lowered the curtain on the SRS as such, and it could rise for either one or two new parties ... the old SRS no longer exists."

¶4. (SBU) Later on September 8, Speaker of Parliament Slavica Djukic-Dejanovic (SPS) announced that Nikolic had created a new caucus called "Forward Serbia." (In a meeting earlier that day Djukic-Dejanovic had told us to "wait and see" what Nikolic would do, noting that some SRS members might choose to take a constructive approach to Parliament's work.) B-92 reported that as of September 8, 11 SRS members had already joined the caucus: Bozidar Delic, Gojko Radic, Mileta Poskurica, Dobrislav Prelic-Doki, Oto Kis Marton, Predrag Mijatovic, Jorgovanka Tabakovic, Mico Rogovic, Vuceta Toskovis, Zoran Babic, and Nikolic. As of September 9, the number had grown to 19. There is speculation that other SRS

members, such as Secretary General Aleksandar Vucic or MP Zoran Krasic could eventually follow Nikolic, although both are reportedly hesitant to lose the income they receive from serving on Seselj's legal defense team.

15. (SBU) Dragan Todorovic, president of the SRS Executive Board, immediately announced that everyone who joined Nikolic's caucus would be expelled from the SRS and Parliament. Nikolic told the press on September 8 that he had "lost the MPs' blank resignation letters," implying that the new SRS leadership would be unable to expel members. He also asserted that the expulsion of an MP was decided by the Parliament's Administrative Committee, which he chairs, rather than a party. (It appears that the Constitution and the Law on Elections are somewhat contradictory on the question of when an MP's mandate ends; a 2003 Constitutional Court decision said that MPs rather than parties "own" their mandate.)

Split Expected, Timing a Surprise

16. (SBU) Knowledgeable observers expected an eventual Nikolic-Seselj split but were nonetheless surprised by the timing, having expected no movement until after Seselj's trial. VIP editor Braca Grubacic, who has broad contacts within the SRS, told us on September 6 that Nikolic had been forced to act earlier than planned when Seselj directed his hard-line followers in Parliament to attack Nikolic on September 2 for meeting with Tadic. (SRS MPs Natasa Jovanovic, Vjerica Radeta and Gordana Pop Lazic used vulgar language to curse President Tadic and "anyone from the party who meets with him.") Grubacic claimed that Nikolic had decided to support the SAA after a late August meeting with President Tadic rumored to have been arranged by Delta owner Miroslav Miskovic.

BELGRADE 00000928 002 OF 002

17. (SBU) Belgrade Mayor Dragan Djilas told us on September 5, before Nikolic's resignation, that the SRS was taking a far more constructive, pro-European approach than former PM Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS, reftel). Djilas said that he had good, "normal" relations with Nikolic, and thought that former Radical and Novi Sad Mayor Maya Gojkovic might rejoin the SRS if it continued on a more moderate course. (Others such as Customs Agency head Predrag Petronijevic have warned us, however, that Nikolic and his loyalists are just as unredeemable as Seselj's hardliners.)

18. (SBU) A contact in the international community who met with Nikolic on September 1 reported that he expressed frustration with the SRS and spoke of plans to form a new party once Seselj returned from The Hague. Our contact concluded that the dispute with Seselj over the SAA was the last straw for Nikolic; his resignation was proof that Seselj was destroying his own party from the inside.

19. (SBU) SRS's opposition "partner," the DSS, is keeping its distance from the dispute. DSS Vice President Alexandar Popovic told us on September 9 that DSS had limited knowledge of SRS inner machinations. "We have joint issues as an opposition, but we disagree on much more," he said. When asked if a Nikolic splinter group would be more appealing to the DSS as an opposition partner, Popovic sniped, "ask your SRS experts in Washington, they know more about the Radicals than we do." (Comment: Popovic was referring to the widely spread rumor during the May 11 elections that the United States was funding the Radicals in order to encourage European recognitions of Kosovo. The logic to this was that if the Radicals came to power, Kosovo would gain more sympathy for its independence. End Comment.)

SRS: Leaner and Meaner?

110. (SBU) Nikolic's departure from his leadership positions leaves hardliners loyal to Seselj firmly in control of the Radical Party. Dragan Todorovic, president of the SRS Executive Board, was elected on September 8 to replace Nikolic as head of the SRS parliamentary caucus. Gordana Pop Lazic will be his deputy whip. The SRS does not want to give Nikolic the opportunity to challenge Seselj at a party congress; SRS vice president Milorad Mircic announced that the

position of deputy president would remain vacant until the party's next regularly-scheduled congress in 2010. (The party's statute permits the calling of extraordinary congresses at the request of the party president, the Executive Committee, or one-fifth of local committees; Nikolic might be able to use the third option if he chose to challenge Seselj directly.)

¶11. (SBU) Grubacic predicted that the SRS's popularity would fall in the wake of Nikolic's resignation. The hardliners' virulently nationalist, anti-European approach is out of step with the vast majority of the Serbian public; a recent poll showed that 61% of Serbs favor joining the EU. (Although some observers claim that Seselj's fiery statements rather than Nikolic's relatively moderate approach are responsible, it is clear that support for the SRS has increased since Nikolic became the acting head in 2003; in 2008 he came within 120,000 votes of defeating Tadic for the presidency, and the SRS secured 77 seats in Parliament.) Grubacic said he expected that in one to two months Nikolic would form a new political grouping with former SRS leader Maja Gojkovic (who left the party in November 2007) and/or Velimir Illic of New Serbia, followed by a wholesale reshuffling of the political right in six months to a year.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) Based on his September 8 move to create a new parliamentary caucus, Nikolic has clearly decided to fight to remain in politics rather than quietly stepping aside. If he succeeds in creating a more moderate and constructive opposition group, there could be an opening for engagement. Conversely, failure would leave the SRS with its full strength in Parliament and no moderating influence in its top leadership, creating the risk of further polarization and obstruction of Serbia's European aspirations. End Comment.

MUNTER